This week’s issue: SHOULD COLLEGES USE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

College admissions can be very competitive. Elite colleges may admit fewer than a quarter of the students who apply. Because the process is tough, deciding what factors should be relevant in admissions decisions can be controversial.

Some colleges look at student race during admissions. Suppose an African American student and a white student are similar. They have about the same grades and test scores. The African American student may be more likely to be accepted. This is called “affirmative action.” Colleges may use affirmative action to increase the number of minorities on campus. Colleges say that racial diversity helps students learn to work with people from different backgrounds.

Affirmative action is designed to make up for past discrimination. African Americans and Latinos were kept out of college in past generations. Even today, students from these groups are less likely than white students to have family members who went to college. Because of this, they may lack support or knowledge in navigating the college admissions process.

Justice Clarence Thomas, the second African American Supreme Court justice in history, does not endorse affirmative action. In his autobiography, he stated that it made his Yale law degree “worth 15 cents.” He wrote, “I’d graduated from one of America’s top law schools, but racial preference had robbed my achievement of its true value.” In short, he felt that people believed he had been accepted into Yale only because of his race, and not as a result of his academic achievement.

However, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina on the Supreme Court, believes affirmative action is relevant and necessary. She was upset when the Supreme Court ruled that Michigan state universities were not obligated to retain affirmative action in admissions. She stated, “This refusal to accept the stark reality that race matters is regrettable . . . As members of the judiciary tasked with intervening to carry out the guarantee of equal protection, we ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society.” She clearly believes in the need to retain affirmative action in order to achieve a society where all races have an equal chance of success.

Without affirmative action, minority students may be less likely to attend elite colleges. At UC Berkeley, the number of African Americans admitted dropped from 562 to 191 after the school stopped using race as one aspect of admissions decisions. Looking at this experience, people argue that race should be retained as a factor in admissions.

Others say affirmative action is not fair because it can discriminate against white students. These people believe schools should only look at grades and test scores. They think that the color of a student’s skin is not relevant. Is it important for colleges to have racial diversity? Is affirmative action an appropriate response to past discrimination?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:
• What kinds of discrimination have you seen in your life?
• Why do some colleges use affirmative action?
• Some colleges use race as one aspect of admissions. What are some other aspects colleges look at in admissions?
• Do you think skin color should be relevant to college admissions?
• Should U.S. colleges retain their affirmative action programs?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS

affirmative (adjective) positive

Sample Sentence: I am hoping that my teacher gives an affirmative answer to my request to postpone the due date!

Turn and Talk: What are some ways to indicate an affirmative answer to a question?

discrimination (noun) different treatment of a particular group of people based on prejudice

Sample Sentence: Last year, we learned about old laws that made discrimination legal in parts of the United States.

Turn and Talk: What can middle school students do to help end discrimination?

aspect (noun) a part of something; a characteristic

Sample Sentence: At UC Berkeley, the number of African Americans admitted dropped from 562 to 191 after the school stopped using race as one aspect of admissions decisions.

Turn and Talk: What is one aspect of being in middle school that is an improvement over elementary school?

retain (verb) to keep; to hold in place

Sample Sentence: People argue that race should be retained as a factor in admissions decisions.

Turn and Talk: What parts of your personality have you retained as you’ve gotten older?

relevant (adjective) closely connected or related to something

Sample Sentence: They think that the color of a student’s skin is not relevant.

Turn and Talk: What magazine, newspaper, or website has articles that are relevant to your life?
DO THE MATH

**Affirmative** action is meant to give groups that have faced **discrimination** a better chance to succeed in American society. College attendance is **relevant** to success because college graduates usually make more money. Therefore, **affirmative** action programs in college might be a good way to help these groups. U.S. courts have decided that colleges can **retain** some, but not all, **affirmative** action programs.

In 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau found the following:

- 40% of white 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college.
- 32% of African American 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college.
- 26% of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college.

**Option 1:** Which of the following shows the fraction of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college in 2008?

A. $\frac{1}{3}$  
B. $\frac{8}{25}$  
C. $\frac{13}{50}$  
D. $\frac{16}{25}$

**Option 2:** The year is 2008. Two 18- to 24-year-olds are chosen at random. One person is African American, and one is white. How much more likely is the white person to be in college than the African American person? Express as a percentage.

The white person is 25% $\left(\frac{40-32}{32}\right)$ more likely to be in college.

**Discussion Question:** In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson described the need for **affirmative** action this way:

“You do not take a man who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race, saying, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe you have been completely fair . . . We seek not just freedom but opportunity—not just legal equity but human ability—not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result.”

Non-whites have long faced prejudice and **discrimination** in America. Women have faced these issues as well. Therefore, when the question of fairness arises, race and gender are seen as **relevant aspects** of the people involved. Some people think that America has become less prejudiced. As a result, they say, today’s America should not **retain** **affirmative** action. But have we achieved “equality as a fact and as a result”? Or did President Johnson choose the wrong goal?
The students in Ms. Kahn’s class are discussing the pros and cons of affirmative action.

“I don’t think race should be relevant in college admissions. If I apply to college, I want to get in because of my work and grades, not because of my skin color,” says Amir.

“It’s not as simple as that, Amir,” says Kayla, “Admissions offices examine many aspects of a student's application, including race—but not only race—to decide to admit one student over another.”

“Yeah, but aren’t we supposed to be past all that?” asks Amir, “Be ‘color-blind’ and all?”

“I think that's just a slogan. I think there is still discrimination in the U.S. today,” Kayla responded. “Think about it. Do you really think that women and people of color get treated the same as white men?”

“My mom was laid off from work a few months ago,” Taylor shared. “She said that more men were retained at her office and that some even got raises. My mom thinks that it's not a fair situation.”

Ms. Kahn says, “We'll need data to support any claims we make, one way or the other. I know of a recent study of U.S. Census data that we can take a look at. I just read about it in the newspaper.”

Ms. Kahn shared a sample of the data from the National Partnership for Women and Families with her students, which used U.S. Census Bureau data to compare average salaries for women and men working full-time jobs in the top fifty metropolitan areas across America.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Average salary for men</th>
<th>Average salary for women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>$52,222</td>
<td>$41,610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>$44,360</td>
<td>$40,695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>$45,970</td>
<td>$34,862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>$55,071</td>
<td>$46,642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>$62,269</td>
<td>$52,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>$60,881</td>
<td>$44,535</td>
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What are some conclusions that you can draw from this information? How does the average salary vary by city? Is the gap larger in some cities? What is the overall trend when comparing the average salary for men and women across this selection of cities?

There is a large variety in the average salary by city, but it is consistently greater for men. The gap in Seattle is >$16K, while the gap in Los Angeles is <$4K.

How would you investigate this topic further? What else would you want to know?

Answers will vary.

When John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act in 1963, women were paid 59 cents for every dollar men were paid. Fifty years later, in 2013, women are paid 77 cents for every dollar that men are paid. Would you consider that a big change, or a small change? Do you think it is fair?
SHOULD COLLEGES USE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

DEBATE THE ISSUE
Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

☐ **Affirmative** action should be legal in college admissions.

☐ **Affirmative** action should not be legal in college admissions.

☐ **CREATE YOUR OWN**

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

- **Can you show me evidence in the text that...**
- **You make a good point, but have you considered...**
- **I believe that...**
- **I agree with you, but...**

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TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

affirmative | discrimination | aspect | retain | relevant

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